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## THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS.

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The imprecations of the Bible, mostly found in the Psalms, have been a source of much controversy, and have presented much perplexity of mind to many an earnest Christian. It may be added that the more refined the reader of these passages is, the greater will be the difficulty occasioned by the attempt at any satisfactory explanation. Not only skeptics and unbelievers, who have triumphantly pointed the finger of scorn at the sentiments pervading these Psalms, but also many of the more devout, have seriously doubted the inspiration of passages containing so much hatred, asperity and vengeance. While many others, not accustomed to thinking, have positively accepted them as inspired truth, simply because found in the Bible, failing, however, to find them profitable for instruction or devotion. And while rebelling against the bitterness of spirit therein exhibited, they yet regard them as the word of God, though having no message for them. Such blind acquiescence is not justifiable until every attempt for light has proved of no avail. An intelligent Christian should not be satisfied with total darkness, when even one single ray of light may be found.

Some of the older exegetes swept out all difficulties with one wave of the hand, by declaring that these were not imprecations, but predictions, simple declarations of what was certain to overtake the incorrigibly wicked. Such explanation can satisfy only the careless reader; for even the English versions show that many verses in these Psalms have the imperative and not the future. This fact will appear more clearly to him who can read the original, for the form of the verb in Hebrew in many of these passages is imperative rather than imperfect (future). And when not imperative, very often the apocopated imperfect. See *Psa.* 5: 10, 11; 55: 9, 10; 69: 24, 25, 28, 29; 109: 6; etc. It is, however, true that the imperfect is used in several of the passages in ques-

tion, and they cannot be made optatives without violence to the text. These must be regarded as a description of the feelings pervading the breasts of those who, in the future, would be eye witnesses of the calamities visited upon the enemies of Zion, rather than as wishes or prayers that such calamities should overtake their enemies. This is true of the harshest and most unfeeling of all these passages, in which the writer describes the spirit of the warriors engaged in the overthrow of a hostile city where, according to the barbarous excesses of a barbarous age, men, women, and even innocent babes were indiscriminately and ruthlessly slaughtered. I refer to Psa. 137: 8, 9.

“ O daughter of Babylon, that art to be destroyed,  
 Happy shall he be that rewardeth thee  
 As thou hast served us.  
 Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones  
 Against a rock.”

Isaiah (13: 16) draws the same picture, as with prophetic eyes he gazes upon the final overthrow of Babylon:

“ Their infants also shall be dashed in pieces before their eyes; their houses shall be spoiled; and their wives ravished.”

So general were these cruelties and excesses, that Homer (Il. 22 : 62ff.) also uses almost the same language:

“ My heroes slain, my bridal bed overturned;  
 My bleeding infants dashed against the floor;  
 My daughters ravished and my city burned.”

These passages seem exceedingly harsh to us, much harsher than to those who first penned them. This ought to remind us of the necessity of explaining even the Scriptures in the light of the time when written, and not from the standpoint of a later and more enlightened age. Care must be taken not to wrest any passage from its proper historical connection. Prof. Edwards, speaking of these vindictive Psalms, says: “ If we were acquainted with the circumstances which called forth the imprecatory Psalms, we should doubtless find as the cause or occasion, striking cases of treachery, practised villany, and unblushing violations of law.” Had we all the data, so as to enable us to interpret these passages in their proper light, many of these dreadful imprecations would lose much of their terrific harshness. Let us also remember that they are written in the language

of poetry; and that the fiery Eastern mind indulged in exaggerated expressions which, divested of their rhetorical extravagance and Oriental coloring, contain no more malice and real venom than may be often found in the more elegant and refined speech of Englishmen.

Another fact which must be duly considered is, that most of these passages are from the pen of David. David was a king, not a private citizen, consequently these imprecations must not be regarded as the mere outpouring of a violent stream of personal indignation, private malice or irritation, but rather the feelings of a king towards the enemies of the state, the Jewish commonwealth. Israel was a theocracy, and David was divinely elected to rule over this people, to promote the national welfare, and ward off hostile invasions. Thus the enemies of David were not only the enemies of Israel, but also of God himself; for, inasmuch as the Jewish state was a theocratic institution to carry out Jehovah's plans on earth, all rebellion against David, whom Jehovah had set upon his holy hill of Zion, was rebellion against God. If this be true, these dreadful imprecations, these prayers for judgment upon, and protection against, enemies, are in entire harmony with *Psa. 2*, where the Psalmist, referring to the heathen, says:—

“Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron.

Thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.”

It is also probable that most of these curses were uttered in times of war, and, as Dr. Noyes points out, are “equivalent to prayers for personal safety,” or, still better, for national success and prosperity. If, as we may reasonably conclude, those upon whom these anathemas were pronounced, these curses invoked, were guilty of treachery and cruelties towards the chosen people of God, such treachery and cruelties as, in any age of the world, would call for speedy retribution, then this severity of language will not appear very strange. The desire to punish great crimes is intuitive. Too great a sympathy for criminals is not necessarily a virtue, but often nothing less than a sickly sentimentality, arising from weak and shallow natures, incapable of appreciating the heinousness of sin and the majesty of the law. Good men always rejoice when a desperate criminal, who for a

time has escaped arrest, is captured and brought to justice. What a feeling of satisfaction and security came over the American people when the Chicago anarchists were summarily dealt with. And yet but very few had any private malice, personal feeling, or spirit of revenge to gratify; and, certainly, none but those unfriendly to American institutions would attribute any cruelty or vindictiveness to the Judge, Jury, and officers connected with that memorable trial. So doubtless these imprecations of the Bible were uttered, not in the heat of personal indignation, but rather when the state and the church were in imminent danger.

Again, if it was right for Israel to execute God's commands and to exterminate whole families and tribes, there could be nothing wrong in invoking divine aid in the execution of such commands, in praying that their enemies should be scattered as chaff before the wind; and that their counsels might be turned into foolishness. Not only was it right, but it would have been wrong to have done otherwise, especially if the people upon whom these imprecations were invoked were leading Israel into sin, and interfering with the religious growth of the nation. In short, if it be right to punish crime, there can be no wrong in praying for the punishment of the perpetrators of crime, or even in invoking Jehovah's aid to mete out speedy retribution.

The Psalmist must have regarded men like Doeg, lost to honor and shame, as incorrigible, deserving no mercy, but worthy of the direst punishment, now, in this life. Explain it as we may, the Old Testament does not throw very much light on the life beyond; the doctrine of retribution in a future state was not unmistakably and clearly revealed to the church in David's time. Hence the naturalness of these imprecations, for if the sinner is to be punished at all it must be in this world. These passages, if viewed in this light, will not appear so vindictive. For, after all, sin is sin, and must be punished. Even the New Testament knows no other method of dealing with the impenitent sinner, with those who continue in rebellion against their Creator. The Old Testament punishes in this life; the New Testament transfers the final decision and execution of the sentence into another world, to a life beyond, where there is "no more sacrifice for

sins but a certain fearful expectation of judgment and a fierceness of fire which shall devour the adversaries."

These imprecations, however, cannot be satisfactorily interpreted without grasping the idea that revelation has been gradual and progressive. This explains why the standard of morality has gradually but constantly advanced. The spirit of Elijah, who called fire from heaven to destroy his enemies, is not the spirit of Christ. There was an old dispensation with all its distinguishing features. It is impossible to understand the two Testaments without emphasizing the fact that God spoke "by divers portions and in divers manners," before speaking finally through the Son. We have, therefore no right to hold up the acts, words or feelings of David to the light of the nineteenth century, or to interpret them from the lofty standpoint of the New Testament. It may be objected that what is essentially immoral in one age or country must have been so at all times and in all ages. Theoretically this is true, but not practically; for both history and experience bear witness to the contrary. How true the words of St. Paul, "the times of ignorance therefore God overlooked." The fundamental principle of morals may be the same at all times, but the standard of morality has often changed; so that there is some truth in the strange assertion that morality, even in the same age, is often a question of geography. Slavery must have been always wrong, yet Moses legislated concerning it, and thus indirectly sanctioned its existence. And with shame we must add, so did also American legislators, a great many centuries after the time of Moses. The position of men and nations on the liquor traffic in the nineteenth century will appear almost incredible to the future generations.

The Sermon on the Mount occupies a higher plane than Mosaism. Up to the advent of our blessed Saviour, the law was a school-master to lead us to Christ, who spoke: "Ye have heard that it was said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy: but I say unto you, Love your enemies and pray for them that persecute you." Thus, if we find in the Old Testament dreadful expressions of anger, and asperity of language, and fearful denunciation of enemies, we are not to be surprised. It is simply because those who

wrote them partook more of the spirit of Moses and Elijah than of him who had a tenderer heart and a clearer vision into the future life, and who, after a life of untold ignominy and suffering, prayed : “ Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Let us bear in mind also that because a prayer containing sentiments contrary to the spirit of Christ is recorded in the Bible, we are not for that reason to see the stamp of God’s approval upon it any more than upon the words of Satan to Job or to our Lord in the wilderness. The mere fact that a prayer contrary to the spirit of the Gospel is found in the Psalms is no proof that it was pleasing to Jehovah, any more than were the wicked acts of David, Solomon, Peter or Judas, which are recorded in the Scriptures. A Psalm containing imprecations may be inspired just as much as a chapter recording the wicked deeds therein described. For, as one has wisely said : “ Inspiration in its true nature secures a truthful record, it does not necessarily secure absolute sanctification ” of those whose acts and feelings are recorded. Persons may be “ imperfect in their conduct ; imperfect in their words ; imperfect in their feelings.” And yet are there not many who never call in question the inspiration of those passages describing David’s most heinous sins, who are utterly shocked at, and are tempted to doubt the inspiration of, what are called the imprecatory Psalms?

There is one more truth which we ought to consider : the teachings of the New Testament are the highest and purest which we can ever expect in this world. Men may, and doubtless will, understand them better in the future. They will continue to grow in beauty and moral grandeur from age to age, to the end of time. In ages to come these imprecations will appear harsher than they do to us to-day. Before the Reformation the Christian Church found little that was objectionable in them ; and the Church under the Old Dispensation found in them nothing at all that was not in harmony with morality and religion. This is only a proof that the Church of God is going on, conquering and to conquer, till we attain unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a full-grown man, unto the measure of the fulness of Christ.